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ABSTRACT

This report examines what happened after the National Intercollegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1986 raised its initial eligibility standards for freshmen (Proposition 48). Opponents believed that raising standards would unfairly restrict minority access to college, and consequently reduce the number of minority students who earn a bachelor's degree. In fact, application of Proposition 48's higher standards coincided with more rather than fewer minority students graduating from college. Over time, their share of all athletic scholarships actually increased. African-Americans who did not qualify for an athletic scholarship under Proposition 48 were frequently replaced by other African-Americans who may have been slightly less skilled athletically but were more able academically. Findings suggested that minority students would continue to succeed under NCAA standards due to take effect in 1996. These rules may result in talented athletes receiving fewer scholarships, but other students with a greater chance of graduating will take their place. (MAH)

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How Will the NCAA's New Standards Affect Minority Student-Athletes?

Stephen P. Klein and Robert M. Bell

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Contrary to predictions, after the NCAA raised eligibility requirements for student-athletes in 1986, more minority student-athletes graduated from college.

How Will the NCAA's New Standards Affect Minority Student-Athletes?

Stephen P. Klein and Robert M. Bell

Statisticians are often asked to estimate what would happen if some new social, economic, health, educational, or other public policy were adopted. We usually respond by collecting what appear to be relevant (and available) data, constructing models, and then using the results of our analyses to predict the policy's likely consequences. All too often, however, our projections miss the mark. Crime bills do not increase the number of offenders arrested or reduce crime as much as expected, revised tax laws do not raise revenues as much as anticipated, patients do not use health care services in forecasted ways, and so on. Such errors may occur because the prediction system does not consider all of the factors and relationships that influence outcomes. Another source of error is that the new policy may change the way individuals and organizations behave: The models may assume a static world although behavior is dynamic.

What happened after the National Intercollegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) raised its "initial eligibility" standards for freshmen illustrates the problem. Prior to the fall of 1986, the only academic requirement for playing as a freshmen at a Division I college was graduating from high school with a C average (2.0 on a

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4.0 scale). All courses, including gym, counted in computing this average. Consequently, many athletic scholarship recipients had poor prospects for earning a college degree. Half of the "student-athletes" (i.e., those on athletic scholarships) were below the 35th percentile of their high school class and only about 35% of the African-American student-athletes graduated within 5 years of entering college. It appeared that some schools were recruiting student-athletes who could contribute to their teams' success even if these students had very little chance of graduating from college.

The foregoing situation influenced the NCAA's decision to pass Proposition 48. This rule, which took effect in 1986, raised academic requirements for incoming freshmen on athletic scholarships. Specifically, to compete as a freshman, a student-athlete had to have at least a 2.0 high school grade point average in 11 core academic courses and a combined SAT mathematics and verbal score of at least 700 (about the 15th percentile nationally) or an equivalent ACT score. These requirements applied to all 298 Division I colleges as per the NCAA's desire to equalize the competition in recruiting talented athletes.

The NCAA recently raised its eligibility standards again and instituted a sliding scale. In this system, a student with a combined SAT score of 700 also needs to have at least a high school GPA of 2.5 in 13 core courses. The NCAA adopted these new standards, which are due to take effect in the fall of 1996, despite some prominent coaches, minority advocates, and sportswriters lobbying to have even the 1986 requirements watered down or eliminated. Opponents of the 1996 standards (just like those who campaigned against the 1986 rules) argue that high school grades and test scores are not really predictive of success in college, that these measures are biased against minority students, and that using these indicators greatly reduces a minority student-athlete's likelihood of attending (and graduating from) college.

In short, the opponents believe raising standards will unfairly restrict minority access to college and, consequently, reduce the number of minority students who earn a bachelors degree. To investigate whether these predictions are likely to come true, we examined whether the NCAA's standards are biased against minority students. We also examined whether the number of African-American student-athletes who entered college as freshmen in 1984 and 1985 under the old standards differed from the number who enrolled after Proposition 48 took effect.

Our analyses, which were conducted with the support of the Knight Foundation's Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, made use of summary data on thousands of scholarship recipients. These data were drawn from NCAA research reports 90–01 through 93-01 and from the NCAA's annual Division I Graduation-Rates Report. We focus on differences between African-Americans and non-Hispanic whites because there were not enough student-athletes in other racial/ethnic groups to provide reliable results.

Are the Measures Biased?

There is a large difference between the African-American and white distributions of core high school grade point averages (CHSGPA's) in the 1984 and 1985 cohorts. The difference in their test score distributions is even larger. This is illustrated by the four bars in Fig. 1. Reading from left to right, the five vertical lines on each bar correspond to the 10th, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 90th percentile points in a group's distribution of scores. These data show that, prior to Proposition 48, more than 75% of the African-American student-athletes had college admission test scores that were below the 25th percentile in the distribution of white scores (x axes in Figs. 1–3 are z scores (number of standard deviations above or below the mean) for a na-

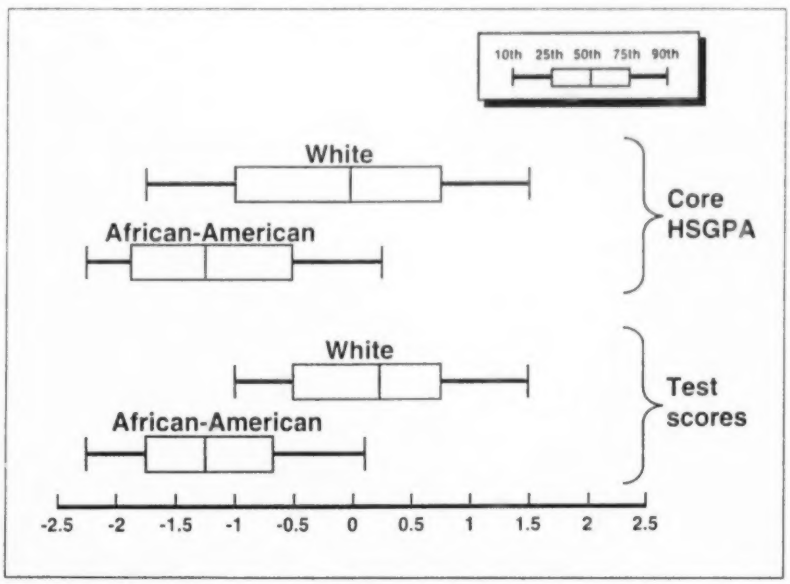

Figure 1. Distribution of admissions measures by race.

tional sample of college-bound high school seniors whose mean and standard deviation were 3.05 and .52 on HSGPA, 906 and 210 on SAT, and 19.6 and 5.8 on ACT).

If Proposition 48 had been applied retroactively to the 1984 and 1985 cohorts, more than 60% of the African-Americans would have been ruled ineligible ($z < -1.0$ on SAT/ACT score). In contrast, only about 10% of the whites would have been ruled ineligible. Projections based on these numbers suggest that African-Americans would receive roughly 14% of the athletic scholarships awarded to freshmen. This would be a 15-percentage-point reduction from their 29% share in the combined 1984 and 1985 cohorts.

Critics have used data like those in Fig. 1 to support their contention that the NCAA's standards are biased against minority students. The generally accepted definition of "bias," however, refers to differences in regression—slope and intercept—between groups (see *Standards for Educational and Psychological Tests*, published jointly in 1985 by the American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education). Figure 2 shows that, according to this definition, admission test scores are not biased—students with the same score have the same probability of graduating from college regardless of their race.

African-Americans have about a nine-percentage-point *lower* college graduation rate than white student-athletes at any given level of CHSGPA (Fig. 3). Thus, this index favors African-Americans in that it overpredicts their graduation rate. Taken together, Figs. 2 and 3 show that the measures the NCAA uses to determine eligibility predict a student's likelihood of graduating from college and that neither of these measures is biased against African-Americans.

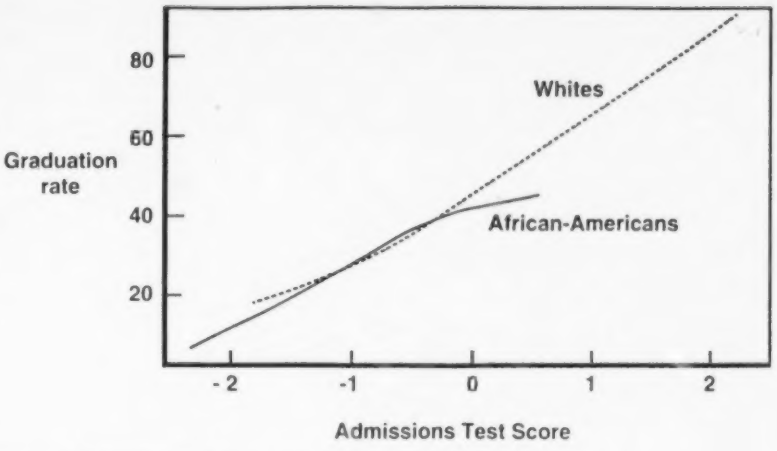

Figure 2. Graduation rate by admissions test score.

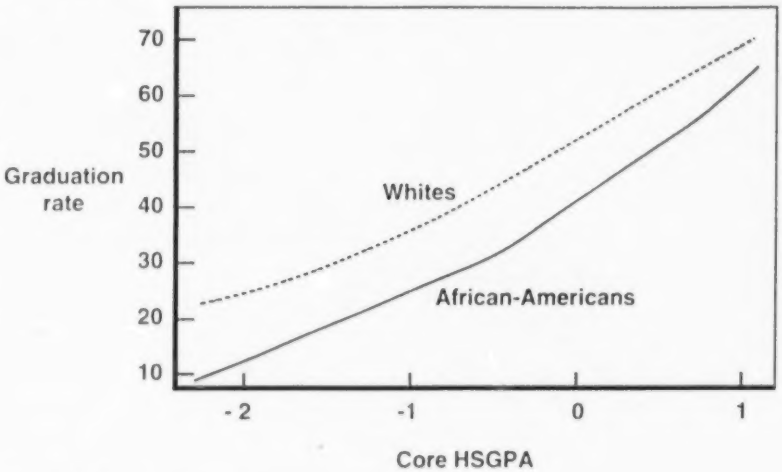

Figure 3. Graduation rate by core HSGPA.

What Were the Effects of Proposition 48?

Our analyses of Proposition 48 examined whether the cohorts of freshmen student-athletes who entered college in 1984 and 1985 differed from the cohorts who entered in 1986 and 1987 with respect to (1) the number of athletic scholarships going to African-Americans and (2) the number of African-Americans who graduated within 5 years of entering college.

Table 1 shows that African-Americans received 29% of the athletic scholarships going to *freshmen* in 1984 and 1985 (the two cohorts entering college immediately before Proposition 48 took effect). Their rate dropped to 25% in the first two cohorts affected by Proposition 48 (i.e., those entering in 1986 and 1987). So, at least initially, the increase in standards corresponded with a decrease in the number and percentage of scholarships awarded to African-Americans. This four-percentage-point reduction, however, was far less than the 15-point drop that would be expected from the data in Fig. 1. More importantly and contrary to the doomsayers' pro-

Table 1—After Proposition 48, Fewer African-American Freshmen Received Athletic Scholarships, But More Graduated

Two-year period	Percent of scholarships awarded to African-Americans	Number of African-Americans on scholarship	Percent graduating	Number graduating
Before Prop-48	29	7303	36	2593
After Prop-48	25	6154	45	2739
Change	–4	–1149	+9	+146

Source: NCAA Division I Graduation-Rates Reports for African-American and White freshmen student-athletes entering all 298 Division I institutions in 1984–1987.

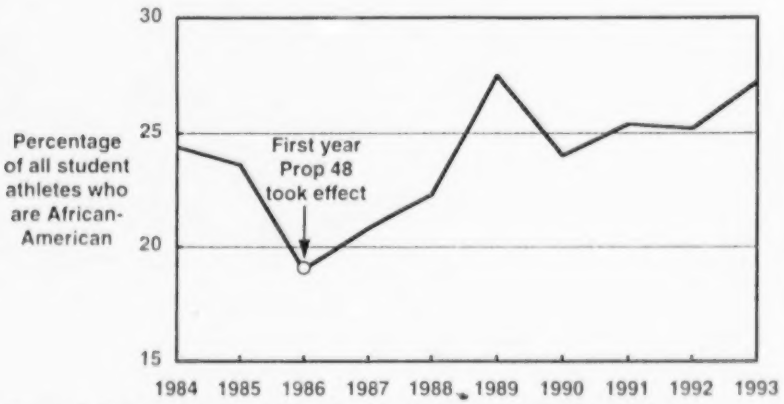

Figure 4. Percentage of African-Americans dipped then rebounded.

jections, more African-Americans graduated after Proposition 48 took effect than previously. This occurred because their nine-percentage-point increase in graduation rate more than offset the drop in the number who received scholarships (the white graduation rate also went up, but by only four percentage points).

More recent data show that the African-American's share of all student-athletes (freshmen and upperclassmen combined) rebounded quickly after the dip that immediately followed the implementation of Proposition 48 (Fig. 4). In fact, the African-American's percentage was greater in 1989 and every year thereafter than it had been in 1985. Taken together, these results and those in Table 1 suggest that the increase in standards in 1986 led to a net gain for African-American students.

Why Were the Doomsayers Wrong?

We suspect a host of factors led to African-American student-athletes being successful under Proposition 48. Many students may have risen to the challenge of higher standards by studying harder in high school and by taking courses that more adequately prepared them for college-level work. Proposition 48 was the stick that motivated them to achieve their potential. Colleges also may have changed their recruiting practices by focusing athletic scholarships on students who have a reasonable chance of graduating even if they are a quarter of a step slower or a half-inch shorter than other candidates. In other words, African-Americans who did not qualify for a sports scholarship under Proposition 48 were frequently replaced by other African-Americans who may have been slightly less skilled athletically but were more able academically. In addition, colleges may have put more emphasis on giving student-athletes more academic support once they arrived on campus.

Conclusions

The notion that raising standards will decrease the number of African-Americans receiving and completing a college education is a myth that sells minority student-athletes short. Experience with Proposition 48 shows that higher standards correspond with more rather than fewer minority students graduating from college, and over time, their share of all athletic scholarships actually increased. These results show that the NCAA was right in not relying on a static view of the world.

Moreover, our findings lead us to predict that minority students will continue to succeed under the NCAA standards that are due to take effect in 1996. These new rules—like the existing ones—may very well result in a school denying scholarships to talented athletes, but other students with a greater chance of graduating will take their place. That is a small price to pay for better serving the interests of *all* students, indeed the nation. The NCAA should be congratulated for its decision to put academics first.